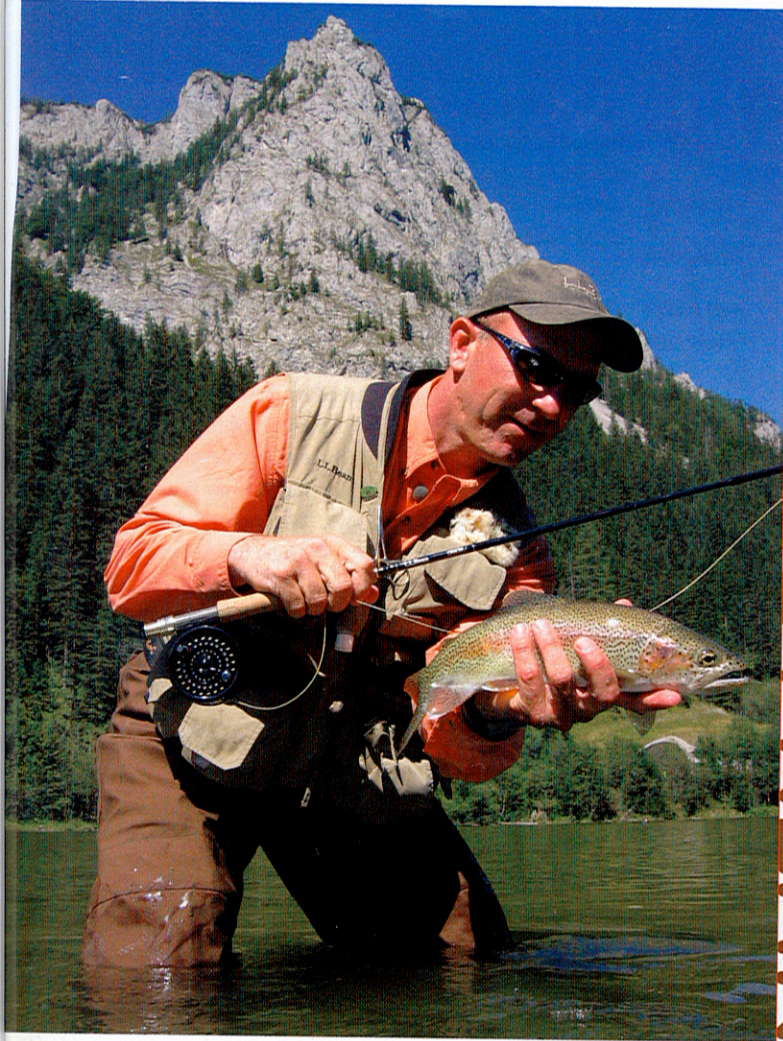


FISHING GOODS



THERE ARE
MERE MORTAL ANGLERS,
AND THEN THERE ARE
LEGENDARY FIGURES
WHO ELEVATE
THE SPORT OF FISHING
TO THE LEVEL
OF THE MIRACULOUS.
MEET FISHING'S NEW PANTHEON—
THREE MEN WHO ARE
FISHING ON A
FAR HIGHER PLANE
THAN THE REST OF US.

(BY EVELYN SPENCE)



TIM RAJEFF DOESN'T EVEN REALLY CARE ABOUT CATCHING FISH. THE CAST'S THE THING, AND NO OTHER ANGLER ON THE PLANET CAN MATCH HIS PASSIONATE OBSESSION WITH THE ART OF TIGHT LOOPS.

Tim Rajeff guesses he has fly cast 6.6 million times in his life: 33 years, 50 days a year, 4,000 casts a day (that's eight casts a minute, 480 casts an hour). Give the man a surf rod, and he can cast a baseball out of the park. Someone 75 feet away can hold out a coffee cup, and Rajeff can make a single cast into a difficult crosswind and hit the cup with a dry fly. "At my peak, I was probably casting 6,000 times a day," he says, laughing. "How's that for being a freak?"

Blame his obsession on sibling rivalry. Rajeff's highly motivated older brother, Steve, was the first in the family to become a fishing prodigy, winning his first national casting championship at 13 and his first all-around worlds at 16. Tim just couldn't sit back and watch. The Rajeff family lived a mile from the country's nexus of tight loops, the Golden Gate Angling and Casting Club in San Francisco, and when Steve headed to the ponds after school to cast and cast and cast, Tim tagged along. "I was like 10, and I was already around the best casters and equipment in the world," he says. "I couldn't help but get into it."

It didn't hurt that the younger Rajeff was born with the ideal physique for the obscure sport of competitive fly casting: quick, strong hands; a strong upper body; perfect vision. But he did things backward. While most people use casting as a means to an end—they want to catch fish first, then realize that they need to improve their technique—Rajeff practiced, devotedly, for two years before he ever caught a trout

****THE FREAK**

on a fly. "It's kind of like someone learning about shooting at targets way before they ever go hunting," he says.

"Tim's the only fisherman I know who doesn't care about catching fish," says longtime friend and guide Hank Rolfs. But Rajeff's method worked: When he was 13, he pleaded with his father to enter him into the adult nationals, but ended up casting against just two other kids in the junior competition instead. He shot a 99 out of 100—which would have placed him second against the men. "That's when I knew I was good," he says. "It's like a punk kid going out and bowling 300."

But Rajeff is no machine. He's exuberant, talkative, insightful. He makes mistakes. As his longtime mentor, fly fishing legend Mel Krieger, says, "Tim is one of us. He's just one of the f—kups. Everybody loves Tim. Everybody."

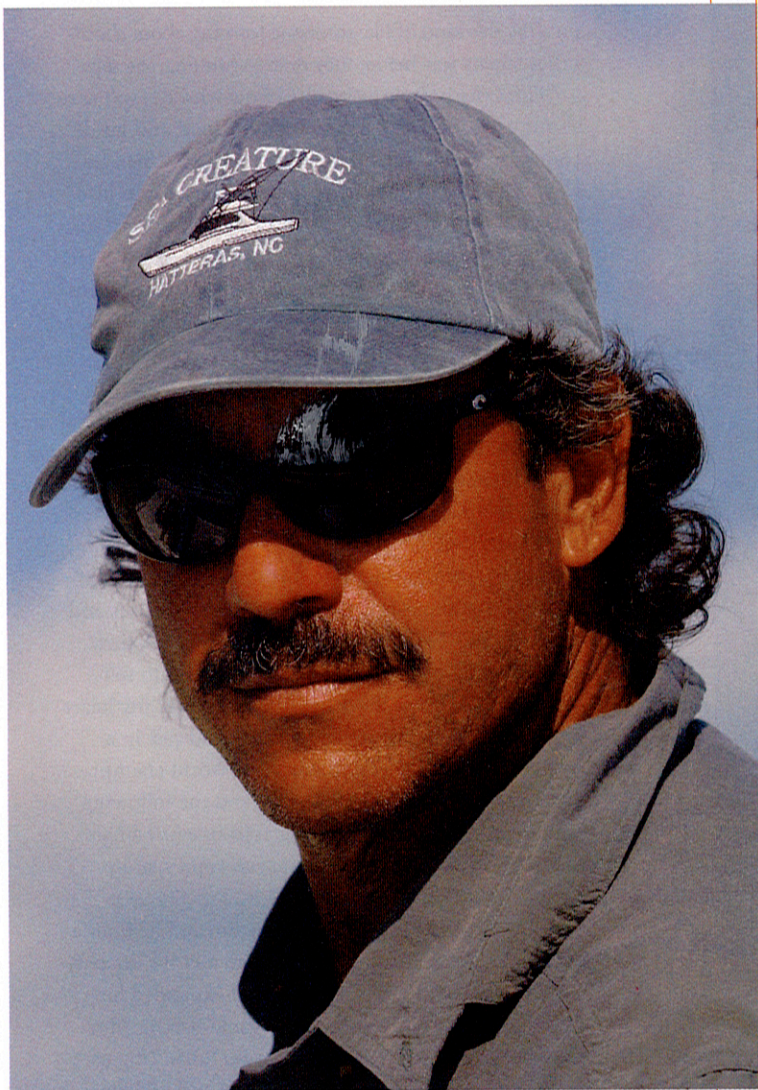
After his breakthrough performance, Rajeff traded casting for adolescence, the first of many hiatuses and hopscoches. "I screwed around until I was 19, then decided to get back into it," he says. "I got into self-hypnosis and biofeedback, and I could lower my heart rate all the way down to less than 50, and cast in a trance." In 1984, he won the distance world championship with a single 205-foot cast, and the following year, took the US title by hitting 100s in every single accuracy comp. The Rajeff name was soon synonymous with casting invincibility.

Before long, his focus wore off again, and he built a salmon lodge on Russia's Ponoï River, met his life partner, fellow guide Katherine Hart, and expanded his fishing repertoire—including big-game fishing with Rolfs. "There can't be a more egotistical sport," says Rolfs. "Big tackle, big boats, big pocketbooks. Tim would just smile and exclaim, 'Look, we're not saving any lives here!'" Or as Rajeff himself puts it when faced with all that ego: "At the end of the day, I don't get that into comparing penises."

As he moved away from competition and toward helping others catch fish, he found a knack for teaching. He'll show you how to cast softer rods by "pretending you're trying to throw a melon-size blob of Jell-O without it falling apart in your hand." You learn to be "mel-lllllllooooooow" and cast with a "ttthhhhhwwwwaaaaacck."

But he couldn't keep away from the spotlight for long. Being a Rajeff, after all, has the same clout as being a Lefty Kreh or a Chico Fernandez, and Tim is constantly asked to instruct, demonstrate—and wow. He recently fished for Crayola-colorful peacock bass in Brazil and trout in Austria as a host for *LL Bean's Guide to the Outdoors* TV series, "where they let me just be a complete goofball. They don't make me sit, heel, beg." In 2003, Tim and his brother won the first OLN Fly Fishing Masters competition, landing a \$30,000 grand prize by outfishing more than 300 competitors from all over the country. When Rajeff puts his mind to it, he's one of the best fishermen on the planet.

But that's not really what he's after. "You know, fly fishing is really about making it as difficult as possible," he says. "It's kind of silly. If you really wanted to catch fish, you'd use bait—or just throw in a stick of dynamite."



JOSE WEJEBE MAY BE THE MOST RECOGNIZED FISHING PERSONALITY ON TV, BUT HE'S NOT STOPPING THERE. HE SEES FILM AS THE ULTIMATE WAY TO TRANSFORM FISHING INTO AN ART FORM.

When Jose Wejebé was 12 years old, he wrote a letter to big-name saltwater hero Stu Apte, included what he now describes as “a couple of ratty-ass-looking flies” that he’d tied out of carpet fiber and dog hair, and asked permission to give him a call. Apte decided to call the kid instead, and the two—outgoing fishing neophyte and veteran 40 years his senior—talked at length. “It was one of the biggest mistakes I ever made,” Apte laughs. “From that day on, Jose would call me every day *right* when school got out. The kid was addicted to fishing. I started asking my wife to answer and tell him I was busy.”

The addiction that started early has lasted 40 years, turning the persistent tween into one of fishing’s most recognizable personalities. Wejebé was born in Cuba in 1958, but his family moved to Miami when he was three. Castro had slowly confiscated their property and businesses: sugar cane, trucking, coffee. At six, Wejebé was hand-lining for snapper in his uncle’s boat—“that’s how everyone fished down in Cuba, so that’s what we did up here”—and reading voraciously about how to catch and cast. When his mother gave him a mask, snorkel and fins, he became infatuated with marine life.

“That’s the reason I got into it,” he says. “I stuck my head in the

**THE SPANISH FLY

water, looked around, and it sold me.” At 16, Wejebé moved to the Keys, and collected tropical fish to sell to wholesalers on the docks. “I spent 10 hours a day underwater,” he says. A few years later, he snagged a job as a shark collector and dolphin trainer at Miami’s Seaquarium—where animals would leap out of the water and grab fish from between his teeth. He got his full captain’s license when he was 18.

Throughout this time, Wejebé kept in touch with Apte—and when Wejebé wanted his first bonefish skiff but was too young for a loan, Apte walked him over to the Royal Trust Bank of Miami, where fellow fisherman Flip Pallot was a vice president. “Flip may or may not have signed the mortgage,” Apte says. “We knew the kid was going places, so we didn’t care.” Wejebé used his new boat to guide the flats up to 300 days a year, becoming one of the most sought-after guides in the Keys. When he could, he traveled with Apte to Costa Rica and helped the natives fly fish for billfish; he worked the boats in Cabo San Lucas and Venezuela.

Pallot started the ESPN show *Walker’s Cay Chronicles* in 1992, and it soon attracted a million viewers a week. Wejebé joined him a few times as a guest—and got hooked on cameras and film. “I thought, ‘Jesus, isn’t this cool?’” he says. “You see something in the wild, and you get to capture it and show people. Yee-haw, look at this!” In 1995, while fishing in the Redbone charity tournament for cystic fibrosis, Wejebé fished with 13-time NBA All-Star John Havlicek. They were being filmed by Jerry McKinnis, whose program *The Fishin’ Hole* is still the second-longest-running program on ESPN, behind *SportsCenter*. The two hit it off. Soon after, a new show called *The Spanish Fly* hit the airwaves on nascent ESPN2.

“At first, it was all about the catching,” Wejebé says.

“Then we started to spend more time talking about the trip than the catch itself. Listen: On fishing shows, you’ll catch a fish. That’s boring! When you tell a different story, people end up watching.” Wejebé brought a new perspective to the typical fishing program. As always, he was close to obsessed with what was under the surface, and never thought twice about getting wet with sharks and piranhas. Underwater, he filmed how the current ripped around rocks, analyzed habitats, and opened his viewers’ minds beyond boat-height perspectives. Nine years later, he still does all the underwater filming for the show.

And now that he’s doing so much filming, he’s started to see fishing as an art form. “I always use classical music for the show’s soundtrack,” he says. “Sometimes fishing is relaxing and soothing, and other times it’s completely frenetic. I try to capture the rhythm of the experience.”

Although he only guides for charity these days, he’s working on another TV gig that brings him back to his first love: “Vida del Mar,” or “Life of the Sea,” combines Wejebé’s marine savvy with his underwater footage, and gives saltwater anglers a new way of seeing the world. “Some photographers used to say to me, ‘Oh, if you can catch a fish on camera, that’s even better than catching it for real!’” he laughs. “I used to think, ‘What a goober.’ Now I’m so glad I get to do it that way.”

PHOTO (THIS PAGE): BY JEFF STINE. (OPPOSITE PAGE): COURTESY TRACKER MARINE



RICK CLUNN WAS THE FIRST PRO BASS FISHERMAN TO NET A MILLION DOLLARS IN WINNINGS. BUT THIS TRANSCENDENTALIST IS IN IT FOR FAR MORE THAN THE CASH: HIS QUEST IS FOR THE INEFFABLE, THE PERFECT SYNERGY OF FISHING AND BEING.

There are many compelling reasons why one would want to be a pro bass angler—money, notoriety, the off chance to host a weekly show on ESPN2. But 58-year-old legend Rick Clunn, who has competed in 28 consecutive Bassmaster Classics and racked up \$3 million, has a far different objective. “The biggest reason I keep on fishing,” he says, “is to touch perfection. I feel like an artist, someone who strives toward the best painting, the flawless piece of music. I want to experience harmony.”

When Clunn started angling the East Texas reservoirs as a boy with his father, men still stayed mum about secret holes and kids pored over the advice of classic fishing writers like Homer Circle and Jason Lucas. No one knew who truly was the greatest angler—fishermen talked in rumors. There were competitions, but they were small. Clunn signed up for monthly tournaments with the Pasadena (Texas) Bass Club, honing his strategies. “For me, the competitions connected theory and reality,” he says. “I was truly learning something, verifying what I understood.” He moved up to regional, state, then national comps, growing as the sport grew.

In 1974, he quit his job with Exxon Oil in Houston. “It was a good thing for rush-hour traffic,” he says. “I hated it. I looked at other people driving, who had angry expressions, or were just expressionless; we were all melting into this unidentifiable glob of humanity.” So Clunn became one of the first men to claim the title “professional fisherman.”

It wasn’t an easy leap: Clunn was suddenly moving into the unknown. “I wasn’t fast, I wasn’t big. I couldn’t run 100 yards in nine flat,” he says. “But with fishing, I could rely on my commitment, my

** THE WARRIOR

desires, my intelligence.” In 1976 and 1977, he won the Bassmaster Classic world championship; he was the first angler to top one million in earnings. As the years passed, he tallied 219 Top 50 finishes. Thirty years later, though, the pioneer’s world has changed: Bass tournaments are sponsored by the likes of Wal-Mart and ESPN; fish are found with electronics; total purses for big competitions push \$15 million over 20 events.

Clunn still competes in 20 tournaments a year, and in 2001, he won the last big tourney that had been missing from his resume, the MEGABUCKS. But these days, when people ask Clunn what he does, he replies, “I’m an athlete.” Which means he’s just as intense as a Game 7 World Series pitcher—and completely convinced of the legitimacy of his sport. “There’s a psychological misunderstanding about fishing: that fish are caught by luck,” he says. “But fishing isn’t a fickle-fated thing. You work hard, you gain knowledge, and you control the outcome.”

His whole career, Clunn has strived to control all that he can. When he can’t control the dark clouds building into a storm, he learns how changing weather affects bass. When everyone else is fishing with crankbaits, he tries spinnerbaits, or uses the same rod for Texas rig worming as for jigging. “Rick doesn’t get complacent,” says Denny Brauer, 1987 B.A.S.S. Angler of the Year and the only angler to ever appear on a Wheaties box. “He preps mentally; he looks at it like a business; he doesn’t get caught up in any hoopla.”

In fact, Clunn’s just looking to get into the angling equivalent of the zone. He approaches fishing from a holistic point of view, combining mind, body and spirit into some sort of piscatorial martial art. “To fish well, you have to understand the psychology, not just the mechanics,” he says. “A lot of people can catch fish, but they can’t find them—even if you fill a bathtub with them.”

He has started teaching younger fisherman his philosophy in a series of volumes and classes called “Angler’s Quest,” which, according to Clunn’s Web site, “expands your awareness of creative visualization, the unknown, and the connection between intuition, purpose, spirit and beyond.” He wants to bring anglers to “super levels,” turn them into “Earth Warriors,” fulfill “The Promise.” Essentially, he wants to show his protégés how to reach the extraordinary.

His Zen methods sometimes ruffle the feathers of the traditional bass establishment. “The testosterone flows fully at these competitions,” he says. “It’s America. We overcame, we tamed the wilderness. There are some guys who think that fishing is about defeating Nature. If you want to excel at that, why not go logging?” Clunn has read everything from the Bible to Zen to Buddhist philosophy. After a victory in 1990, he quoted *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*—and a Christian group seized the interview tapes to analyze them for Satanism.

It was at that same competition—his fourth victorious Bassmaster Classic world championships, on Virginia’s James River—that Clunn feels he touched perfection. He somehow erased all negativity: When the wind blew, it just pushed him to the next fish. When another fisherman cut him off, he headed in another fortuitous direction. “On that final day, I truly experienced harmony,” he said. “I felt like I wasn’t even on the same body of water as the rest of the field.” **HOOKED**